

Rethinking the Critical Theory of Capitalism

Moishe Postone

I would like to outline why, in my judgment, a critical theory of capitalism is necessary today, and why such a theory must be different from traditional critiques of capitalism. That is, I intend to critically interrogate some common understandings of the nature of the fundamental social relations of capitalism. I shall do so in a way that interprets the Marxian categories as categories of social form, thereby calling into question the familiar base/superstructure conceptual schema.

The fundamental historical transformations of recent decades — such as the rollback of welfare states in the capitalist West, the collapse or fundamental metamorphosis of bureaucratic party states in the communist East, the apparently triumphant emergence of a neo-liberal global capitalist order, and the possible development of rivalries among competing capitalist blocs — have reasserted the central importance of historical dynamics and large scale global structural changes. Because these changes have included the dramatic collapse and final dissolution of the Soviet Union and European Communism, they have been interpreted by many as marking the historical end of Marxism and more generally, of the theoretical relevance of Marx's social theory. Nevertheless, the historical developments of recent decades have also made clear that an underlying dynamic of capitalism, understood socially and culturally as well as economically, has continued to exist in both East and West, and that the notion, so prevalent in the decades following the Second World War, that the state could control that dynamic, was at best temporarily valid. This overt re-emergence of the dynamic of capitalism not only calls into question theories of the primacy of the political as they were formulated during the post-war 'golden age' of capitalism, but also post-structuralist

understandings of history as completely contingent. Moreover, it indicates that our understanding of democratic self-determination as promulgated by theories of civil society or the public sphere has to be re-thought.

Recent historical transformations, then, suggest the importance of a renewed encounter with Marx's critique of political economy, for the problematic of historical dynamics and global structural changes is at the very heart of that critique. Nevertheless, the history of the last century also suggests that traditional Marxism is not fully adequate to the contemporary world and an adequate critical theory must differ in important and basic ways from traditional critiques of capitalism.

By 'traditional Marxism' I do not mean a specific historical tendency in Marxism but, more generally, any analysis of capitalism essentially in terms of class relations rooted in private property relations and mediated by the market. Relations of domination are understood essentially in terms of class domination and exploitation within this general interpretive framework; socialism is understood primarily as a society characterized by the collective ownership of the means of production and centralized planning in an industrialized context: a just and consciously regulated mode of distribution adequate to industrial production.

Although powerful economic, political, social, historical, and cultural analyses have been generated within this traditional framework, its limitations have become increasingly evident in the light of historical developments such as the rise and decline of "actually existing socialism" and state-interventionist capitalism, the growing importance of scientific knowledge and advanced technology in the process of production, growing criticisms of technological progress and growth, and the increased importance of non-class based social identities. They suggest that the traditional approach can no longer serve as an adequate basis for an emancipatory critical theory.

Coming to terms with the inescapable and obvious centrality of capitalism in the world today, then, requires a reconceptualization of capital, one that breaks fundamentally with the traditional Marxist frame.

It has become evident, considered retrospectively, that the social-political-economic-cultural configuration of capitalist hegemony has varied historically. From mercantilism, through nineteenth century liberal capitalism and twentieth century state centric Fordist capitalism to contemporary neo-liberal global capitalism, each configuration has elicited a number of penetrating critiques — of exploitation and uneven and inequitable growth, for example, or of technocratic, bureaucratic modes of domination. Each of these critiques however, is incomplete; as we now see, capitalism cannot be identified fully with any of its historical configurations. This raises the question of the core nature of the social formation.

My work attempts to contribute to a critical understanding of that core of capitalism, one that is not limited to any one of that social formation's epochs. I argue that at the heart of capitalism is a historically dynamic process, associated with multiple historical configurations, which Marx sought to grasp with the category of capital. This core feature of the modern world must be grasped if a critical theory of capitalism is to be adequate to its object. Such an understanding of capitalism can only be achieved at a very high level of abstraction. It could then serve as a point of departure for an analysis of epochal changes in capitalism, as well as for the historically changing subjectivities expressed in historically determinant social movements.

In attempting to rethink Marx's analysis of capitalism's most basic relations, I try to reconstruct the systematic character of Marx's categorical analysis rather than rely on statements by Marx without reference to their locus in the unfolding of his mode of presentation. I argue that the categories of Marx's mature critique are historically specific to modern or capitalist society. This 'turn' to a notion of historical specificity implicitly entailed a notion of the historical specificity of Marx's own theory. This means that all transhistorical notions, including many of Marx's earlier conceptions regarding history, society and labour, as expressed in the idea of a dialectical logic underlying human history as a whole, for example, became historically relativised. In disputing their transhistorical validity in his mature works, however, Marx did not claim that such notions were never valid. Instead he restricted their validity to the capitalist social formation, while showing how that which is historically specific to capitalism can appear

to be transhistorical. This is an important dimension of what Marx sought to do with his notion of the fetish.

If, however, such notions are valid only for capitalist society, Marx now had to uncover the grounds for their validity in the specific characteristics of that society. He sought to do so by locating the most fundamental form of social relations that characterizes capitalist society and, on that basis, unfolding a theory with which he attempted to explain the underlying workings of that society. That fundamental form is the commodity. Marx took the term “commodity” and used it to designate a historically specific form of social relations, constituted as a structured form of social practice that at the same time is the structuring principle of the actions, worldviews and dispositions of people. As a category of practice it is form both of social subjectivity and objectivity. (This understanding of the categories, strongly emphasized by Lukács, suggests an approach to culture and society as intrinsically related moments of a social form; it is quite different from the base/superstructure model.)

What characterizes the commodity form of social relations as analysed by Marx is that it is constituted by labour, it exists in objectified form, and it has a dualistic character. In order to elucidate this description, Marx’s conception of the historical specificity of labour in capitalism must be clarified. Marx maintains that labour in capitalism has what he calls ‘a double character:’ it is both ‘concrete labour’ and ‘abstract labour.’ ‘Concrete labour’ refers to the fact that some form of what we consider labouring activity mediates the interactions of humans with nature in all societies. ‘Abstract labour’ does not simply refer to concrete labour in general, however, but is a very different sort of category. It signifies that in capitalism labour also has a unique social function that is not intrinsic to labouring activity as such. It mediates a new form of social interdependence.

Let me elaborate: In a society in which the commodity is the basic structuring category of the whole, labour and its products are not socially distributed by traditional norms or overt relations of power and domination – that is, by ‘manifest social relations’ as is the case in other societies. Instead, labour itself replaces those social relations, by serving as a kind of quasi-objective means by which the products of others are acquired. A new

form of interdependence comes into being, where people do not consume what they produce, but where, nevertheless, their own labour or labour product functions as a quasi-objective, necessary means of obtaining the product of others. In serving as such a means, labour and its product in effect pre-empt that function on the part of manifest social relations.

In Marx's mature works then, the notion of the centrality of labour to social life is not a transhistorical proposition. It neither refers to the fact that material production is always a precondition of social life, nor should it be taken as meaning that material production is the most essential dimension of social life in general, or even of capitalism in particular. Rather, it refers to the historically specific constitution by labour in capitalism of a form of social mediation that fundamentally characterizes that society. On the basis of his analysis of this form of mediation, Marx tries to socially ground the basic features of modernity.

Labour in capitalism then, is not only labour as we transhistorically and common-sensically understand it, according to Marx, but is also a historically specific socially mediating activity. Hence its objectifications (commodity, capital) are both concrete labour products and objectified forms of social mediation. According to this analysis then, the social relations that most basically characterize capitalist society are very different from the qualitatively specific, overt social relations, such as kinship relations or relation of personal direct domination, which characterize non-capitalist societies. Although the latter kind of social relations do continue to exist in capitalism, what ultimately structures that society is a new underlying level of social relations constituted by labour. Those relations have a peculiar quasi-objective formal character, and are dualistic: they are characterized by the opposition of an abstract, general, homogeneous dimension, and a concrete particular material dimension, both of which appear to be natural rather than social, and condition social conceptions of natural reality. (I won't elaborate here, but it seems to me this would be the material basis for an analysis of the dualisms that characterizes modern Western thought.)

The abstract character of the social mediation underlying capitalism is also expressed in the form of wealth dominant in that society. Marx's 'labour theory of value' frequently has been misunderstood as a labour theory of wealth: that is, a theory that seeks to explain the workings of the market and prove the existence of exploitation by arguing that labour, at all times and all places, is the only social source of wealth. Marx's analysis is not one of wealth in general any more than it is of labour in general. He analyses value as a historically specific form of wealth that is bound to the historically unique role of labour in capitalism. As a form of wealth it is also a form of social mediation. The social mediation at the core of capitalism does not appear in Marx's analysis with the category of money – it is there from the beginning.

Marx explicitly distinguishes value from what he calls 'material wealth' and relates these two distinct forms of wealth to the duality of labour in capitalism. Material wealth is measured by the quantity of products produced, and is a function of a number of factors, such as knowledge, social organization and natural conditions, in addition to labour. Value, according to Marx, is constituted by human labour-time expenditure alone, and is the dominant form of wealth in capitalism. Whereas material wealth, when it is the dominant form of wealth, is mediated by overt social relations that are extrinsic to it, value is a self-mediating form of wealth. As I shall elaborate, Marx's analysis of capital is of a social system based on value that both generates and constrains the historical possibility of its own overcoming by a social order based on material wealth.

Within the framework of this interpretation then, what fundamentally characterizes capitalism is a historically abstract form of social mediation constituted by labour. Although this historically specific form of mediation is constituted by determinate forms of practice, it becomes quasi-independent of the people engaged in those practices. The result is a historically new form of social domination, one that subjects people to increasingly impersonal rationalized imperatives and constraints that cannot adequately be grasped in terms of class domination or, more generally, in terms of the concrete domination of social groupings or institutional agencies of the state and/or of the economy. It has no determinate locus (like Foucault's notion of power) and although constituted by determinate forms of social practice appears not to be social at all.

Significant in this regard is Marx's temporal determination of the magnitude of value. In his discussion of the magnitude of value in terms of socially necessary labour time, Marx points to a peculiarity of value as a social form of wealth whose measure is temporal: increasing productivity increases the amounts of use-values produced per unit time, but it results only in short term increases in the magnitude of value created per unit time. Once that productive increase becomes general, the magnitude of value falls to its base level. The result is a sort of a treadmill. On the one hand increased levels of productivity result in great increases in use value production, yet increased productivity does not result in long-term proportional increases in value (the social form of wealth in capitalism). Note that this peculiar treadmill dynamic is rooted in value's temporal dimension and it cannot be fully explained through the way this pattern is generalized (for example, through competition). The historically specific abstract form of social domination intrinsic to capitalism's fundamental forms of social mediation is the domination of people by time. This form of domination is bound to a historically specific abstract form of temporality, abstract Newtonian time, which is constituted historically with the commodity form.

This dynamic which I have briefly outlined, is at the core of capital, which, for Marx, is a category of movement. It entails a ceaseless process of value's self-expansion, a directional movement with no external telos that generates large-scale cycles of production and consumption, creation and destruction. Significantly, in introducing the category of capital in *Capital*, Marx describes it with the same language that Hegel used in the *Phenomenology* with reference to Geist – the self-moving substance that is the subject of its own process. In so doing, Marx suggests that a historical Subject in the Hegelian sense does indeed exist in capitalism. Yet — and this is crucially important — he does not identify that Subject with the proletariat (as does Lukács) or even with humanity. Instead he identifies it with capital. Marx's critique of Hegel in *Capital* suggests that capitalist relations are not extrinsic to the Subject as that which hinders its full realization. Rather he analyses those very relations as constituting the Subject. These relations, however, at their deepest level, are forms of mediation that cannot be grasped fully in terms of the relations of the owners of the means of production and property-less

workers, however important the latter may have been in the genesis of capitalism and however important it remains in capitalism.

In his mature theory then, Marx does not posit an historical meta-subject, such as the proletariat, which will realise itself in a future socialist society, but provides the basis for a critique of such a notion. This implies a position very different from that of theorists like Lukács, for whom the social totality constituted by labour provides the standpoint of the critique of capitalism, and is to be realized in socialism. In *Capital*, the totality and labour constituting it have become the objects of critique. The historical Subject is the alienated structure of social mediation that is at the heart of the capitalist formation. The contradictions of capital point to the abolition, not the realization of the Subject. In *Capital*, Marx roots capitalism's historical dynamic ultimately in the double character of the commodity and hence capital. The treadmill dynamic I have outlined is at the heart of this dynamic. It cannot be grasped if the category of surplus-value is understood only as a category of exploitation, as surplus value and not also as surplus value – that is, as a surplus of a temporal form of wealth.

The temporality of this dynamic is not only abstract. Although changes in productivity, in the use-value dimension, do not change the amount of value produced per unit time, they do change the determination of what counts as a given unit of time. The unit of (abstract) time is pushed forward, as it were, in (historical) time. The movement here is of time. Both abstract time and historical time are constituted historically as structures of domination.

This dialectic of value and use value becomes historically significant with the emergence of relative surplus value and gives rise to a very complex non-linear historical dynamic underlying modern society. On the one hand, this dynamic is characterized by ongoing transformations of production and, more generally of social life; on the other hand, this historical dynamic entails the ongoing reconstitution of its own fundamental condition as an unchanging feature of social life — namely that social mediation is ultimately effected by labour and, hence, that living labour remains integral to the process of production (considered in terms of society as a whole) regardless of the level of productivity. The

historical dynamic of capitalism ceaselessly generates what is new while regenerating what is the same. This dynamic both generates the possibility of another organization of social life and yet hinders that possibility from being realized. Marx grasped this historical dynamic with his category of capital. With the real subsumption of labour, in Marx's account, capital becomes less and less the mystified form of powers that 'actually' are those of the workers. Rather, the productive powers of capital increasingly become socially general productive powers that no longer can be understood as those of the immediate producers alone. This constitution and accumulation of socially general knowledge renders proletarian labour increasingly anachronistic. At the same time the dialectic of value and use value reconstitutes the necessity of such labour.

One implication of this analysis is that capital does not exist as a unitary totality and that the Marxian notion of the dialectical contradiction between the forces and relations of production does not refer to a contradiction between relations that presumably are intrinsically capitalistic (for example, the market and private property) and forces that purportedly are extrinsic to capital (labour). Rather, that dialectical contradiction is one between the two dimensions of capital itself, and is ultimately rooted in the two dimensions of the commodity form. As a contradictory totality, capital is generative of the complex historical dynamic I have begun to outline – a dynamic that points to the possibility of its own overcoming.

As an aside, it should be noted that by grounding the contradictory character of the social formation in the dualistic forms expressed by the categories of the commodity and capital, Marx implies that structurally based social contradiction is specific to capitalism. The notion that reality, or social relations in general, are essentially contradictory and dialectical, appears in light of this analysis to be one that can only be assumed metaphysically not explained. This also suggests that any theory that posits an intrinsic developmental logic to history as such – whether dialectical or evolutionary – projects what is the case for capitalism onto human history in general.

The understanding of capitalism's complex dynamic I have outlined allows for a critical, social (rather than technological) analysis of the trajectory of growth and the structure of

production in modern society. Marx's key concept of surplus-value not only indicates, as traditional interpretation would have it, that the surplus is produced by the working class, but that capitalism is characterized by a determinate, runaway form of growth. The problem of economic growth in capitalism, within this framework, is not only that it is crisis-ridden, as has been frequently and correctly emphasized by traditional Marxist approaches. Rather, the form of growth itself, one entailing the accelerating destruction of the natural environment, is itself problematic. The trajectory of growth would be very different according to this approach, if the ultimate goal of production were increased quantities of goods rather than of surplus-value.

This approach also provides the basis for a critical analysis of the structure of social labour and the nature of production in capitalism. It indicates that the industrial process of production should not be grasped as a technical process that although increasingly socialized, is used by private capitalists for their own ends. Rather, the approach I am outlining grasps that process itself as intrinsically capitalist. Capital's drive for ongoing increases in productivity gives rise to a productive apparatus of considerable technological sophistication that renders the production of material wealth essentially independent of direct human labour time expenditure. This, in turn, opens the possibility of large-scale socially-general reductions in labour time, and fundamental changes in the nature and social organization of labour. Yet these possibilities are not and cannot be realized in capitalism. The development of technologically sophisticated production does not liberate people from fragmented and repetitive labour. Similarly, labour-time is not reduced under socially general levels but is distributed unequally, even increasing for many.

According to the interpretation very briefly outlined here, then, Marx's theory extends far beyond the traditional critique of bourgeois relations of distribution (the market and private property). It is not only a critique of exploitation, and the unequal distribution of wealth and power, although it of course includes that. Rather, it grasps modern industrial society itself as capitalist, and critically analyses capitalism primarily in terms of abstract structures of domination, increasing fragmentation of individual labour and individual existence, and a blind runaway developmental logic. It treats the working class as the

basic element of capital, rather than the embodiment of its negation, and implicitly conceptualizes socialism not in terms of the realization of labour and industrial production, but in terms of the possible abolition of the proletariat and the organization of labour based on proletarian labour, as well as of the dynamic system of abstract compulsion constituted by labour as a socially mediating activity. This approach re-conceptualizes a post-capitalist society in terms of the overcoming of the proletariat, in other words, the self-abolition of the proletariat and the labour it does — that is, in terms of a transformation of the general structure of labour and of time. In that sense it differs both from the traditional Marxist notion of the ‘realisation’ of the proletariat, and from the capitalist mode of abolishing national working classes by creating an underclass within the framework of the unequal distribution of labour and of time, nationally and globally.

Although the logically abstract level of analysis outlined here does not immediately address the issue of the specific factors underlying the structural transformations of the past thirty years, it can provide a framework within which those transformations can be grounded socially and understood historically. At the same time it could provide the basis for a critical theory of “actually existing socialist” countries as alternative forms of capitalist accumulation, rather than as social modes that represented the historical negation of capital, in however imperfect a form.

Inasmuch as it seeks to ground socially, and is critical of, the abstract quasi-objective social relations and the nature of production, work, and the imperatives of growth in capitalism, this approach could also begin to address a range of contemporary concerns, dissatisfactions and aspirations in ways that could tie them to the development of capital – even if not in traditional class terms. It might also be able to approach the global rise of forms of “fundamentalisms” as populist, fetishized forms of opposition to the differential effects of neo-liberal global capitalism.

In constituting a framework for addressing such issues, the interpretation I have outlined seeks to contribute to the discourse of contemporary critical social theory and to our understanding of the far-reaching transformations of our social universe.

A number of questions from the audience followed:

Q. You talk about the danger of disillusion in the anti-capitalist movement by an over-emphasis upon the traditional critiques of capitalism you outline. How would you relate anti-Semitism, and possibly Islamic fundamentalism, to this kind of halfway critique you criticize?

A. I should say something about the anti-Semitism piece for those of you who haven't read it so that you will understand where the question comes from. I wrote an article years ago on anti-Semitism and tried to deal with it using Marx's analysis. I claimed that anti-Semitism is very different from most forms of racism. It differs from them because it projects enormous invisible global power to the Jews. The whole idea of a world conspiracy is intrinsic to modern anti-Semitism. I tried to analyse anti-Semitism with reference to the Marxian notion of the dual character of the commodity category. In developing the fetishes associated with the idea of the dual character of the commodity, I argued that the form itself renders possible separating off the concrete (as being socially "natural," whether or not one ties it to race theory) from the abstract, which is seen as impinging on the concrete and distorting it. This opposition allows one to understand a central feature of National Socialist ideology. That ideology was not fundamentally anti-modern, and it is a mistake to label it as such. It is true that it claimed to defend the peasantry and artisanal labour, but it also affirmed modern technology and industrial production. It make more sense to see that ideology as affirming the concrete dimension — which includes technology, and industrial production, as well as the peasantry and manual labour – as the core of healthy, organic social life, against the abstract, which is reified as finance capital. One of the reasons I react very strongly to the mechanical separation of finance capital from industrial capital is that, ultimately, this is right wing populism. I think people have forgotten that there were forms of 'anti-imperialism' before 1945 that were not progressive, and that there was a fascist International, and that fascism isn't just a militarized defence of bourgeois society, or a policeman beating up on workers with a banker in the background. Movements like National Socialism really saw

themselves as revolts against the bourgeois order, and others also saw them that way. I was trying not only to illuminate anti-Semitism but also what I would regard as the reactionary character of certain anti-hegemonic forms. Not all anti-hegemonic forms are progressive. In this regard, the issue of fundamentalism is a tremendously complex issue that I can't even begin to address here. It is very noticeable how widespread it has become – for example, in the United States, the Muslim world, and South Asia. (Europeans do other things when they become reactionary – they don't become fundamentalist.) Why certain forms of discontent have taken that form is, I think, very complicated, but if you read the writings of someone like Qutb – the ideologue of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (Hamas is an offshoot of that organization) - what is noteworthy is that his attack on the Zionist project isn't first and foremost because it is displacing Palestinian peasants or anything like that; it is because that project is the bridgehead for a degenerate world civilization created by Jews, like Freud, Durkheim and Marx, which saps the organic vitality of healthy societies. Such an analysis that has very little to do with the Muslim tradition. It very strongly echoes National Socialist ideology, but not simply because the Nazis put lots of money into their Egyptian project. I think there is something about the structuring of the forms themselves that lends itself to this kind of world conspiracy thinking.

Q. I think your analysis of the commodity form is right, but how do you make the jump to a critique of everyday life? Your critique is very broad in a way, but everyday life is immensely complicated with all sorts of mediations going on. In your book *Time, Labour and Social Domination* you critique Habermas very clearly, but I'm not sure if you are comparing like with like. Habermas and the Frankfurt School were looking at vestiges of everyday social forms in capitalism and trying to understand it, whereas you seem to be working at a much more abstract level.

A. I certainly agree that there are many mediations that have to be worked out in order to deal with everyday life, but let's leave Habermas out for the time being – I don't really think he has much to say about 'everyday life.' I think he talks about concepts that point to the existence of everyday life (audience laughs) but that's very different from having concepts that explain everyday life; he has this notion of an almost ontologically based

resistance to what he calls the colonization of the lifeworld by the system. It is an approach I find problematic. Be that as it may I wouldn't dream of trying to compare myself to the Critical Theorists and the richness with which they approached so many dimensions of social life. Nevertheless, it seems to me that what is also important is the understanding that frames what they did. What I argue is that their framing and understanding had a lot to do with their understanding of capitalism and its contradictions. For someone like Adorno, there no longer are any intrinsic contradictions. But, however problematic the movements of the 1960s might have been, the rise of these kinds of social movements has to be explained. If we are going to take a theory of capitalism seriously the emergence of those movements should at least be rendered plausible with reference to a theory of capital. But this would require introducing a notion of contradiction different from that considered by the Critical Theorists. So I was trying to rethink the frame for their kind of analysis – a kind of analysis to which I am very sympathetic. Similarly, I learned an enormous amount from Lukács, even though I am very critical of important aspects of his approach. I learn from him and criticize him, in order to push the project further. In this respect, it seems to me – and this only begins to get at the complexity of what you just raised – that the notion of social form is fundamentally significant. The idea of social form would allow one to begin to provide a social-historical analysis of what Foucault attempted to analyse as discursive, or in terms of disciplinary practices. Focusing on private ownership of the means of production doesn't address the kinds of issues Foucault raised. That sort of narrow definition of capitalism not only leaves the form of the state completely outside of consideration, but it can't deal with Foucault's argument about disciplinary practices. Yet Foucault's treatment of those practices is itself problematic. He provides a historical story he can't explain. Whether writing about the birth of the clinic or the prison, Foucault gives us a sense of a number of interrelated historical breaks that belie his insistence on the completely contingent nature of history. However, he can't explain these breaks on the basis of his meta-theoretical considerations. And it seems to me that the idea of social form would allow one to at least begin to approach something like the rise of the disciplines, this sort of micro-rationalisation of the body and of life historically in ways that base-superstructure approaches and an economistic reading can't get at.

Q. Two questions – first, on the issue of progress in human history, what do you think of science, in the sense of empirical science, and the issue of its objectivity and capitalism? And secondly, arguing against what I see as a kind of idealism in your position I want to point out that Marxism is defined as the project of the emancipation of the working class, which you are criticizing. I would like to pin you down a bit more – it reminded me a little of Raya Dunyaskaya’s criticism of Lenin for not having read Hegel’s *Logic* all the way through. And it seems like you are criticizing Marxists for having not read *Capital* ‘all the way through.’ I fear you may be succumbing to the results of the defeats of 1968 that resulted in the post-structuralist debacles. It seems to me that you seem to be suggesting that mistaking Hegel’s spirit as the proletariat rather than capital leads one towards political errors and that Lenin was therefore automatically wrong. I want to place you in terms of the 20th Century political map, as it were.

A. You retranslated what I said about history and added in the word ‘progress.’ I was referring much more to the idea – and perhaps you can call it progress – that history has a sort of intrinsic motor that drives it. And I think this is uniquely the case in capitalism and that Marx’s analysis is of this uniqueness. There are historical developments in other social formations, but those developments are not by any means continuous. But let me pick up on your example of science: What is significant for me when considering the 17th Century scientific revolution, for example, is the different way in which what is real becomes conceptualized. Whereas Aristotelian science looked at the qualities of things, Galileo and Descartes said what is really real are primary qualities – matter in motion – and everything else qualitative is the result of our senses. This turn has led to certain kinds of developments that have been very impressive, but within the framework of certain kinds of questions. Other sorts of questions are laid aside. Aristotelian science has a lot more in common with what Levi-Strauss called ‘savage thinking’ than it does with Galileo’s thought. Levi-Strauss argued that there is a long plateau period of thousands of years in terms of scientific and technological development. The Middle Ages are not particularly advanced over Ancient Rome, which isn’t that advanced over Ancient Egypt. An enormous change then occurs with the development of capitalism. This is not a matter of the same development accelerating; the understanding of nature itself, I would argue,

becomes informed by the commodity form. It is only with capitalism that you can really talk about this 'locomotive' of history. A problem I have with a great deal of post-structuralism is that it affirms the idea of contingency in a way that dissolves the existence of capitalism. Such approaches are right to relate contingency to freedom. They are wrong in that they don't see that capitalism is a tremendous constraint upon contingency.

The second half of the question - I don't know where I would put myself on the map. I don't think that I have been that influenced by the post-structuralists. I didn't like them from the beginning. I certainly don't believe that if Kautsky or Lenin had read *Capital* 'properly' things would look very different. They read *Capital* from an early 20th Century perspective. I'm clearly reading it from an early 21st Century perspective. Of course I am arguing that this is the meaning of the categories – but not because I think I have a privileged insight into Marx's motives or intentions, what he really meant. I don't claim to have that insight. It's the meaning the categories have today. There are different ways of approaching Marx's texts. There are some people who look for logical contradictions and breaks in Marx's thought — that's one possible way. I try to make the case for the non-contradictory coherence of his categories. Not because I think he was a world historical genius, but because I am trying to see how far the categories will take us in developing a powerful critical theory of the present. My interpretation of the proletariat I think was strongly influenced by the 1960s, not just 1968. That decade saw the rise of mass movements that were not working class movements or traditional peasant or petty bourgeois movements. At the same time, in the metropolises, you had the end of the growth of the working class. What begins to affect a lot of people - including parts of the working class - is the very work that they are doing, and not just the conditions of work, and the level of remuneration. The nature and structure of work itself began to be challenged.

Is the proletariat crucial to capitalism? Yes, absolutely. It is actually more crucial to capitalism than the bourgeoisie. You can have capitalism without the bourgeoisie but you cannot have capitalism without the proletariat. Over-coming capitalism requires the self-abolition of the proletariat. This makes the question of left-wing politics extremely

difficult. How can you talk about the self-abolition of the proletariat when working people are being pushed against the wall? I think it is very difficult to try to mediate the issue of defending the achievements of working class movements in a neo-liberal universe, and a position that avoids hypostatizing the working class as the bearer of the future. I don't claim to have any easy answers to that, but I do think the abolition of the working class is the key to the liberation of humanity. I agree with Marx's formulation.

Q. You talk about the possibilities of overcoming the capitalist mode of production and I guess I want to ask more about how you see their overcoming... sometimes you talk about it as if it were producing an order based on material wealth rather than an order based on value and, really, surplus value but I wonder if that doesn't get away from the fundamental insight about social forms, and I would say social form and purpose. I mean the commodity is really commodity-capital, and is produced for a specific purpose, which is value, so my question is about the issue of material wealth as a goal. Is positing a society orientated toward the production of material wealth actually avoiding the issue of determinant social form and purpose? What is the social form of the material wealth in the post capitalist society?

A. This is extremely abstract. I was suggesting, as opposed to people who only see value as a category of the market, or those like Joan Robinson who see value as something which will only be realized in socialism. I was trying to talk about value as a fundamental social form of capitalism, and I left the question of the future form indeterminate - on purpose, because it seems to me that the contradictions of capitalism at best point to the possibility that the existing form can be overcome. Once I use the words 'material wealth' I am suggesting that a future form would no longer be a self mediating form of wealth – it would have to be mediated, for example, politically. That then raises the whole issue of politics.

Q. One thing I would like you to say more about is time and the centrality of time as the measure of abstract labour in capitalism.

A. I argue that socially necessary labour time is on the one hand simply a descriptive statement – how long does it take to produce a widget, for example – and on the other hand it describes a compulsion. If you don't produce the widget within the parameters of socially necessary labour time, you haven't generated the value determined by those parameters. It seems to me that it is the second, compulsory moment that should be the object of critique. Because we are not going to simply abolish the time constituted by the capitalist social formation — whether Newtonian time or historical time — the question is whether it would be possible for time to be dealt with as descriptive, rather than abstractly prescriptive and compulsory. It seems to me the task is to try and disaggregate the two.

Q. You suggest at one point that the discussion of the self-abolition of the proletariat must, in Marxian terms, be conducted imminently, that is to say we cannot just concoct some account, but must try to ground it imminently, which is what Marx does in *Capital*. In a certain sense he has identified the working class struggle away from capital, time away for free social development. Isn't that where the self-abolition of the proletariat comes in, and not a concoction of some grand plan?

A. The beginnings of such struggles were quickly shut down by the crisis of Fordism itself. There was already the beginning of a development in this direction because it can be plausibly argued that a large number of workers became increasingly dissatisfied with the kind of work they were doing. If we are serious about the notion that subjectivities are historically constituted, such subjectivity that calls existing work into question should be a general one, not limited to parts of the working class. That is to say, the general character of the struggle should be seen already in a variety of struggles. That suggests a certain kind of politics – which was disastrously absent in the United States – a certain kind of politics that would try to at least get these movements talking to each other. Not in some kind of mechanical 'rainbow coalition – we're all oppressed' way, but rather as being moved by the same impulses, in a sense, and by similar imaginings of something

better. I despair of the possibility of such politics now, but I very much agree that emancipatory anticipations have to be in the struggles themselves, and that the struggle for time is very much back on the agenda. In America people work all the time – perhaps we will be able to push the issue further this time.

Q. In your book you seem to suggest that a planned economy is more dangerous than free-market capitalism. What are the lessons for the left today in terms of the Stalinist horrors that we can learn from?

A. You know, I've always been uncomfortable with the static opposition of 'planning' to 'market' because everything depends upon what is being planned. What was being planned in the Soviet Union was primitive accumulation. You don't have to be a Menshevik in order to see that the project of imposing will on history failed. A few years ago I was reviewing Lenin's *What is To Be Done?* What really struck me was that on some fundamental level Lenin and Bernstein both shared a common assumption - that history was moving against a working class revolution. Of course they drew diametrically opposite conclusions. But I would suggest that already in 1904/05 Lenin developed the idea revolution as an act of will against the flow of history. To then simply speak of the Soviet Union as a planned economy without further determinations is one of the many distortions that can be countered by a deeply historical Marxian analysis.

I am not suspicious of planning per se – I do however want to uncover what it is that is being planned or coordinated. At some point the left is really going to have to seriously revisit the issue of the Soviet Union.

Q. Would you say that Communism in the Soviet Union progressed as St Augustine was supposed to have progressed - from reason to faith? It became a matter of faith rather than reason. Pseudo-religious trappings start to appear in Stalinist ideology.

A. It's a very complicated issue, involving a number of displacements. One set of questions involves the relation of communist activists throughout the world and the Soviet Union, both in terms of the worldviews of the former and the policies of the latter. For example, Saddam Hussein slaughtered the Iraqi Communist party with the blessing

of the Soviet Union and the blessing of the United States. This wasn't the first time the Soviet Union sold out local communists. Your comment opens up an enormous set of issues that require serious analysis.

Q. On the one hand you are highly critical of the Soviet Union, and on the other you are also saying that communism is the self-abolition of the proletariat. Can you just say a bit more on that? Because in the case of the Soviet Union the working class was most definitely not abolished. It strikes me that we had a non-capitalist mode of production where nevertheless the proletariat continues to exist. We have a logic of capital and labour as a mediating activity, but at the same time we have to consider the non-capitalist aspect to it.

A. Looking back at the pattern of the 20th Century – the temporal pattern of the 20th Century - one way to do it is to look at the rise and fall of state-centric capitalism, Fordist capitalism. This is a general movement. You can date its beginnings from 1914 (or 1917 in the East), and you can date its end in the West from 1973 (1989 in the East.) The rise and fall of this form – leaving the Soviet Union aside for a moment – happened in ways that were independent of what political party was in power. The expansion of the welfare state occurs everywhere in the West after 1949 or so, and it is rolled back everywhere in the 1970s, regardless of whether Social Democrats or Christian Democrats, Republicans or Democrats are in power. This pattern cannot be explained in local or contingent terms. That doesn't mean there are no contingencies or local inflections involved, but it seems to me that these large-scale patterns require some explanation and that a theory of capital (unlike post-structuralist and anti-necessitarian positions) can address such issues. The Soviet Union, in my view, should be understood within the larger framework of a state-centric historical configuration of capitalism. Within that historical framework it represented an attempt by a semi-peripheral country to emerge from that position. As many have pointed out, you couldn't have had the abolition of the working class in that situation. On the contrary, you had the constitution of a working class through a process of state-directed primitive accumulation. What happened in the Soviet Union under Stalin were several brutal decades that historically recapitulated what had taken hundreds of brutal years in England. This process was one of constituting national capital. It was,

however, presented as building socialism, thereby completely distorting the critical thrust of Marx's analysis.

One of the reasons why I have tried to deal with the categories of commodity and capital without reference at first to categories of the market and private property is so that they can also illuminate such forms of national state-centric capital. Otherwise the critical theory of capital becomes a much more partial theory than it should be – of nineteenth century liberal capitalism.

Q. Can you explain what you mean by 'concrete' and 'abstract labour' in a little more depth?

A. In analyzing labour in capitalism, Marx distinguishes 'concrete' and 'abstract' labour. I suggest that 'concrete labour' simply refers to what we normally refer to as 'labouring activity.' 'Abstract labour,' however, is a very difficult concept. I am suggesting that what Marx means by it is that labour has a function in capitalist society as a socially mediating activity that is different from the function of labouring activity in any other society, and that this is a point of departure for his whole analysis of capitalism. Labour in capitalism, for Marx, is historically specific in both of its dimensions, and yet there is a difference. As I have argued, 'abstract labour' isn't 'concrete labour' in general, but refers to labour's mediating function in capitalism. In Marx's analysis this function exists only in capitalism. The category of 'concrete labour' also only exists in capitalism in the sense that it refers to a whole range of activities that in other societies aren't seen as being similar. They are seen as being ontologically different from one another. This doesn't mean people aren't engaged in these activities, but that they understand them differently. Nevertheless, it is conceivable that one could take the category of 'concrete labour' and apply it to other forms of social life, but only if one is aware of the fact that the actors themselves didn't regard those activities that way. To take the category of abstract labour and project it backwards, however, is completely illegitimate. So, in attempting to analyse a pre-capitalist society, one would have to work out its intrinsic structuring categories; one would not necessarily begin with labour. The thing about labour in capitalism is that it both mediates the interactions of humans and nature, as well

as the social relations among people. This double character is historically specific (which was misunderstood by Habermas when he transhistorically posited the distinction between labour and interaction). It is precisely because labour in capitalism mediates both that it is so central; it constitutes the peculiar social relations characterizing capitalism. In another society that may not be the case – however important labour might be for human society anywhere.

Q. ‘The anti-German left’ (in Germany) has been known to carry the American and Israeli flags to anti-war demonstrations. I wonder if you would comment on how your work influences them?

A. I actually find aspects of the anti-war movement today very different from the anti-war movement of the 1960s. On the one hand, there is a real reification going on, whereby global capital and the U.S. are completely conflated. On the other hand, elements on the left in Germany who are critical of this reification react as you have described, which I think is a serious mistake. The clash itself is indicative of an impasse the left has reached, not only with regard to the Middle East, but also in general. This dualistic opposition does not present a meaningful choice for progressives. There has been too little analysis of what was a serious dilemma conceptually and politically for the left: the conflict between a global imperialist power and a brutal local fascist regime. (That the Ba’ath party was backed by the Soviet Union doesn’t make it any less fascist.) Mass mobilization against the war, however, tended to sidestep the dilemma. But the situation is fundamentally different from that in the 1960s. Correctly or incorrectly, many on the left in the 1960s thought that the Vietnamese Communists did represent something progressive, and that the American empire was preventing something progressive from happening. This was also the assumption behind the movements against US policies in Central America, as well as the movements that supported the ANC. But the situation in the Middle East today is fundamentally different. It poses a dilemma. Yet it seems that opposition to the US is in and of itself regarded by many as progressive. This not only involves a reification of global capital as America (which is a mistake, however wretched the Bush administration), but also is a hollowed-out form of Cold War dualism. I’m not

happy that my writings are being used in the way you mention, because I want them to be used to crack open that dualism.